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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews research which indicates that (1) more adults spend more time at job related reading than at any other type of reading; (2) materials written for functional purposes (job manuals, newspapers) are often too difficult for the people who are supposed to read them; (3) secondary English courses focus more on teaching reading and writing for academic purposes than for functional purposes; and (4) efforts are needed to provide re-direction for priorities and practices in teaching English at the secondary school, with a shift of emphasis away from English for academicians toward functional literacy. (Author)

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NEEDED: A FUNCTIONAL LITERACY SKILLS CURRICULUM FOR THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

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Human Resources Research Organization

Abstract

This paper reviews research which indicates that (1) more adults spend more time at job related reading than any other type of reading; (2) materials written for functional purposes (job manuals; newspapers) are often too difficult for the people who are supposed to read them; (3) secondary English courses focus more on teaching reading and writing for academic purposes than for functional purposes; and (4) efforts are needed to provide re-direction for priorities and practices in teaching English at the secondary school; with a shift of emphasis away from English for academicians toward functional literacy.

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Though it is not certain why, it is certainly the case that we frequently create a topsy-turvy world for ourselves. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the contrast between our teaching of reading and writing in the schools and the kinds of reading and writing done in the world outside the school.

A recent newsletter from Educational Testing Service[1] reports the results of a national survey to determine, among other things, what the average American adult reads in one day and how long he spends reading it. Results indicated that more people (42%) spent more time (61 minutes a day) at work-related reading than any other type of reading. Newspaper reading occupied the most people (74%), but they spent considerably less time (35 minutes/day) at this type of reading.

Thus while functional work-oriented reading is the primary reading activity of out-of-school adults, secondary schools typically allocate the overwhelming majority of their time to teaching the reading and interpreting of novels, short stories, dramas, and poetry.

And if the teaching of functional reading is short-changed in the secondary school English curriculum, how about the teaching of functional writing -- for example, the writing of job manuals, instructions, procedural directions and other technical writing?

Dolores Landreman[2], technical writer for Battelle Memorial Institute, and former high school English teacher summarizes the problem: "...if articles published in the *English Journal* can be considered indicative of the major interests of American high school English teachers, these teachers apparently feel no great responsibility for grappling seriously with the specific problem of improving scientific and technical communication... They also appear to be much concerned with the expectations of college English faculties. The possible needs of the ultimate consumers -- the eventual employers of their students -- do not seem to have been given the intensive investigation one might expect... Technical communication apparently is not conceived of as a proper area of student interest." Though technical writing forms the bulk

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[1] *ETS Developments*, Vol. XIX, No. 4, Summer 1972.

[2] Dolores Landreman, *English Journal*, Vol. 61:3, March, 1972, pp. 389-403.

of the reading materials for working adults, students are typically not taught such writing in the secondary schools. Technical writing is generally taught in colleges or technical institutes. But there is reason to question the adequacy of this instruction. For instance, though a technical writer is repeatedly admonished to "define his reader" -- "what is his reading level?", etc., -- they frequently are far off the mark. Caylor, et al.[3], using a special readability formula which they developed to estimate the reading grade level of difficulty of job manuals found that more than half the reading materials in 7 U.S. Army career fields were of 11 to 12+ grade level in difficulty. These procedures were extended by the U.S. Army in a study of more than 400 technical manuals with the same finding -- most of the manuals were written at a level well above the 9th grade reading level of the average soldier.

But the manual writers are not alone in overshooting their mark. Barganz and Dulin[4] reported readability levels of lead articles in several magazines -- *Reader's Digest, Saturday Evening Post, Popular Mechanics, Ladies Home Journal,* and *Harper's* -- and found them to be, on the average, of 12-13th grade level of difficulty; and they were that way over a 40 year period! Newspaper journalists fared somewhat better in a study by Razik[5] in which he found that news articles concerning crime, features, local news, weather, and national political news were written at the 9-10th grade level. Stories relating to economy, space, international news, and state and national non-political news were written at the 11-12th grade level. Small wonder that dramatic increases in the reading of newspapers and magazines is found among the more highly educated -- professional/managerial -- higher income groups![6]

We can go on: the National Reading Council's Survival Literacy Study[7] indicated that many U.S. Government public forms were too difficult for 18.5 million American adults; the National Assessment of Educational Progress[8] found that, of adults asked to write a letter ordering a product, acceptable responses were obtained in only 49% of the samples; only 57 percent of adults wrote adequate directions for making or doing something; less than 30% of men reading at the 9th grade level scored 70% on a job reading task test for supply clerks in the study by Sticht et al.[9]; ...

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[3]Caylor, et al., *Methodologies for Determining Reading Requirements of Military Occupational Specialties*, HumRRO Technical Report, January 1972.

[4]Barganz & Dulin, *Nineteenth Yearbook of the National Reading Conference*, Vol. II, 1970, p. 29.

[5]Raxik, T. A., *Journal of Communication*, 1969, pp. 317-324.

[6]Wade & Schramm, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 33, 1969, p. 197.

[7]Hon. Margaret M. Heckler, *The Congressional Record*, Nov. 18, 1970, E9719.

[8]*National Assessment of Educational Progress*, January-February; 1971, (201A Huren Towers, 2222 Fuller Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48105).

[9]Sticht, T. et al., *Reading Research Quarterly*, Spring 1972.

But there is no need to go on -- the evidence is overwhelming in indicating that many adults -- young or older -- cannot read and use with facility much of the written materials needed to function well in our society. On the other hand, the evidence just as strongly indicates that the majority of those who prepare written materials to serve functional purposes fail to match the literacy skills of many of their intended readers.

Apparently, those responsible for teaching reading at the secondary school level are usually English teachers, and they teach reading and interpretation of literature. Their teaching of writing is almost solely restricted to composition. They are typically *not* extensively (if at all) trained in teaching reading and writing of a functional nature: technical writing and editing, journalism (news gathering and reporting), copy writing (advertising), business writing and reading (forms construction; memoranda), and integrated use of writing and graphic designs.

Likewise the instruction of persons involved in the various areas of functional writing cited above reflects only the most informal understanding of the reading process and the cognitive processes which their writing demands of the reader. Examination of books written to teach technical writing, for instance, indicates that, beyond some knowledge of readability formulas and admonitions to write clearly and concisely, and to keep the reader's needs in mind, there is little understanding of the role of such cognitive processes as short term memory, or perceptual processes such as the "chunking" of information, or behavioristic concepts such as cue-response paradigms, to provide the technical writer with empirically founded heuristics for writing for readers.

It appears, then, that there is presently a separation between those who teach reading and those who, outside the school, produce the written materials which school graduates and in-school students must read to function outside the school. Those who write newspapers typically do not teach reading of newspapers; those who write job technical manuals do not teach the reading of such manuals; those who write advertising copy do not teach the reading of such copy; those who produce job aids in the form of various guidebooks, flow charts, picture books, etc., do not teach how to read such aids; persons who write various government pamphlets and booklets do not teach how to read those materials.

On the other hand, those who teach reading in English courses rarely write job aids, technical manuals, advertising copy, newspapers, government pamphlets or the other functional reading materials encountered outside the school.

The lack of communication between these two groups, i.e., functional writers and teachers of reading, may account, at least in part, for the breakdowns in the communication of functional information to the general public as indicated above.

Efforts are needed which build bridges to span the gaps presently separating the functional writing disciplines from the field of English-reading instruction. Such efforts should not only stimulate current members of these disciplines to view their work as interrelated, and forge an inter-disciplinary approach to a technology of communicating by written text, they should also provide re-direction for priorities and practices in English teaching at the secondary level; away from a primary focus on teaching academic English to produce more English academicians; toward teaching functional literacy to produce functional readers and writers -- young adults with work-relevant literacy skills and knowledges which improve their *employability* as well as their schoolability.